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ABSTRACT

A survey of 335 students (33.5% response) enrolled in the National Extension College (NEC) revealed that the proportion of women students increased significantly; two-thirds of NEC students were women. The mean age of NEC students stayed relatively constant. The proportion of employed women was relatively high; the proportion of employed men was lower than expected. A large proportion of male students was retired. NEC students came increasingly from administrative, management, and office occupations. Since 1984, students with low prior educational qualifications increased in proportionate size. The principal reasons for studying with NEC remained unchanged and were traditional reasons for studying by open learning: being able to study in one's own time, at one's own pace, and at home. Women took their most recent course for employment- or career-related reasons, men for personal interest. Among those students preparing for a future career change, women were hoping to become teachers or lecturers; the biggest area of career change for men was to administrative or management jobs. The proportions of men and women who sought financial assistance were identical. Women found fee payment difficult more frequently. Most students studied solely with NEC materials and an appointed tutor. Gender had a significant impact on reasons for lack of progress in a course. Most were studying with NEC for the first time. For three of four students, their current studies were part of a longer-term study plan. (YLB)

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WHO ARE NEC'S INVISIBLE STUDENTS?

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A report of a Student Profile Survey 1989/90

CE 061 507

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WHO ARE NEC'S INVISIBLE STUDENTS?

A report of a Student Profile Survey 1989/90

NATIONAL EXTENSION

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WHO ARE NEC'S INVISIBLE STUDENTS?

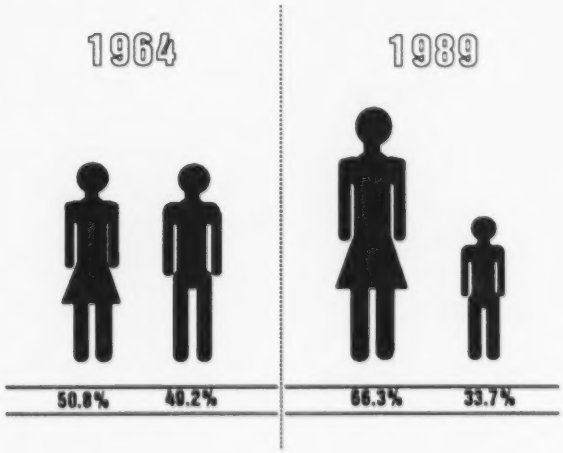
A report of a Student Profile Survey 1989/90

From time to time NEC has conducted surveys to find out what sort of people study with the College. The earliest surveys were used to gather feedback from projects and from students who had studied particular courses. But in 1975 a systematic attempt was made to profile the whole NEC student body. Another survey in 1984 updated this information. These surveys provided a useful and fascinating picture of NEC's students but were confined to describing social and educational characteristics. They established who studies with NEC but gave very limited answers to why students enrolled with NEC and no details about their experiences while studying. A new survey was conducted in 1990 and this report is based on its findings. This latest survey was designed to update the social and demographic information of the two earlier surveys but also explored the learning experiences of students. Verbatim comments from students are reproduced in the body of the report in italics.

For each survey, including this latest one, a questionnaire was sent to a random sample of 1,000 students selected from those who enrolled over the period of a year. The current survey sample was therefore drawn from students enrolled with NEC in 1989. Some 335 completed questionnaires were returned and form the basis of the data in this report. This response rate of 33.5% compares favourably with 24.2% in 1984 and 33.0% in 1975. As far as was possible, questions about social and demographic characteristics in the 1990 survey were posed in similar ways to those in earlier surveys to allow comparisons to be made with the 1975 and 1984 data. The findings of the 1989/90 survey are reported below.

STUDENT GENDER AND AGES

It seems that the proportion of women among NEC students has increased significantly.

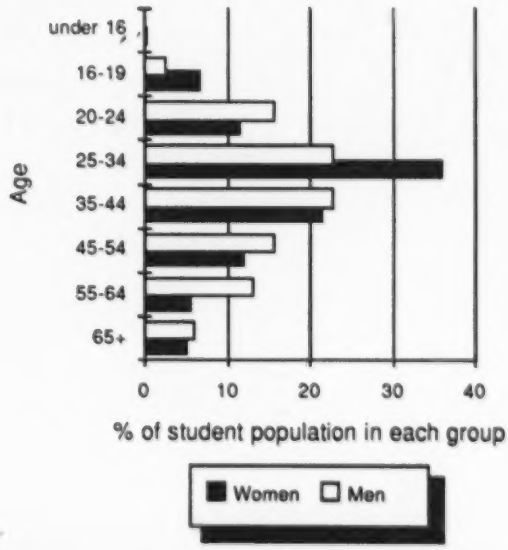


Thus it now seems that two-thirds of NEC students are women.

There will be a number of reasons for this increase in women's participation at NEC. One will be the changing profile of courses offered by NEC; in 1986 a significant number of students were on computer related courses which are invariably dominated by male students. On the other hand the recent expansion in "return to learning" and "return to work" courses will be attractive to women. More generally, distance education itself now has a higher profile and is seen as especially suitable for a number of otherwise educationally disadvantaged groups such as women.

As the proportions of women and men in NEC's student population are so different (as has been noted, at a ratio of 2:1) and as other demographic characteristics often vary for each group, a breakdown by gender is used in many of the subsequent sets of data in this report.

For example we find that the age profile of men and women is different.



The mean ages of students in the surveys were found to be:

Survey	*Women*	*Men*	*All*
1975	33.3	36.8	35.1
1984	37.0	39.0	38.1
1990	36.0	39.7	37.2

Thus the mean age of NEC students seems to have stayed relatively constant.

When the 1990 data is compared with that from earlier surveys, the main shift is found to be in the 25-34 and 35-44 year-old age groups. In 1990 there were proportionately more students in the 25-34 age group than hitherto while there are fewer in the 35-44 age group.

OCCUPATION

Compared to previous surveys, this issue was approached slightly differently in 1990. First students were asked if they were in paid employment for 20 or more hours per week:

	Women	*Men*	*All*
Working 20+ hours	48.2%	65.5%	54.0%
<20 hours/unemployed	51.8%	34.5%	46.0%

An interesting picture starts to emerge. The proportion of women in employment is relatively high; on the other hand the proportion of men in employment is lower than one might expect. This data will be of particular relevance when, later in the report, the type of courses being studied is analysed. Similarly, the personal circumstances and occupations of students will be relevant.

	Women	*Men*	*All*
Mainly a housewife	38.3%	0.0%	28.6%
Registered unemployed	6.1%	10.3%	7.1%
Other unemployed	5.2%	15.4%	7.8%
Retired	18.3%	35.9%	22.7%
Full-time student	6.1%	7.7%	6.5%
In institution or hospital	0.9%	10.3%	3.2%
Employed <20 hours	9.6%	5.1%	13.0%

This data shows that a large proportion of the male students is retired (indeed more than classify themselves as unemployed). The 1984 survey report observed similar patterns but it was then thought that "the proportion of older men taking courses will (reduce to) the 1975 level". However, is can now be seen that there is actually a relatively large and stable cohort of male NEC students that is retired.

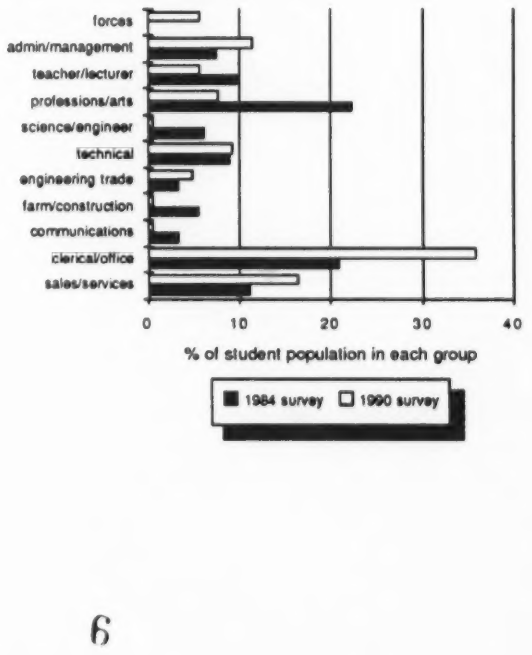
Looking at the occupation of those in employment:

	Women	*Men*	*All*
Armed forces	0.0%	14.3%	5.8%
Admin/management	9.6%	14.3%	11.5%
Teachers and lecturers	6.0%	5.4%	5.8%
Professions/the arts	8.4%	7.1%	7.9%
Scientists and engineers	1.2%	0.0%	0.7%
Technical	8.4%	10.7%	9.4%
Engineering trades	0.0%	12.5%	5.0%
Farming/construction	1.2%	0.0%	0.7%
Transport	0.0%	1.8%	0.7%
Clerical and office staff	50.6%	14.3%	36.0%
Sales and services	14.5%	19.6%	16.5%

(The precise definitions of occupations used in the questionnaire were: armed forces; administrators and managers; teachers and lecturers; professions and the arts; qualified scientists and engineers; technical: including computing, draughts-men/women, technicians; electrical or electronic, metal and machines, engineering and allied trades; farming, mining, construction and other manufacturing; communication and transport; clerical and office staff; shopkeepers, sales, services, sports, fire brigade, police.)

The predominance of women in clerical and office jobs is notable but other equally interesting features emerge when the latest data is compared with the 1984 survey which, while not seeking detailed information about those not in paid employment, did ask about occupations.
The following graph shows, for example, NEC students coming increasingly from administrative, management, and office occupations; the compensating reductions have taken place in those from the professions and "industrial" forms of work. To some extent this therefore reflects employment trends in the period but is likely to have been amplified by the increased awareness of the training and development needs of office and management related occupations that has occurred in the recent past.

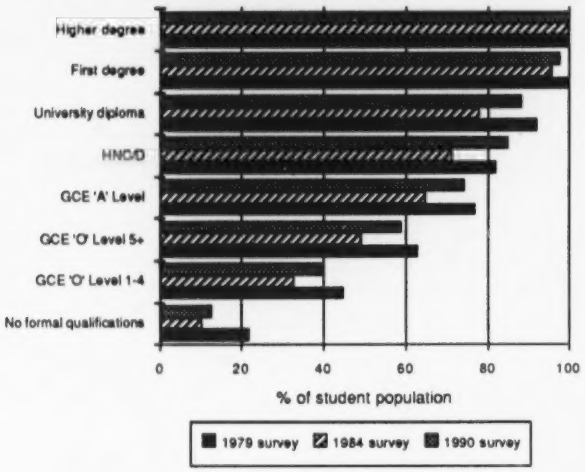
Occupations of NEC students



QUALIFICATIONS ON ENROLMENT

Each of the surveys has examined the highest level of previous education. The overall findings can be shown as follows:

Previous educational level



This shows that between 1979 and 1984 the proportion of NEC students with low prior educational qualifications fell. However, since 1984 this group has increased in proportionate size.

Thus it is encouraging to discover that NEC is increasingly providing a learning opportunity for those who have previously not had it; NEC is providing access to education for many who are otherwise educationally disadvantaged.

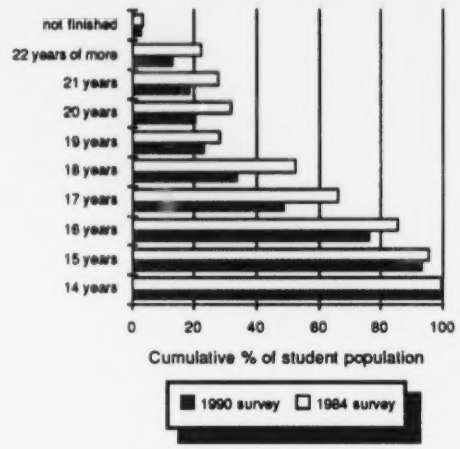
These observations are reinforced by the information collected about student ages on completion of full-time education:

	Women	*Men*	*All*
not yet finished	2.7%	5.3%	3.6%
22 or more	8.1%	13.3%	9.9%
21	6.8%	2.7%	5.4%
20	2.3%	0.9%	1.8%
19	3.6%	1.8%	3.0%
18	11.3%	8.8%	10.4%
17	16.2%	12.4%	14.9%
16	30.2%	22.1%	27.5%
15	14.4%	22.1%	17.0%
14	4.5%	10.6%	6.6%

Comparisons are made with the 1979 and 1984 data in the graph. The overall pattern here is, not surprisingly, similar to that for educational level - but serves to reinforce the fact that by 1989 NEC was again providing significant learning opportunities for those who had left school at a relatively young age.

"I think that everyone who leaves school with little or no qualifications should be aware of these courses."

Age on completion of full-time education



GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION

To add to the demographic picture students were asked to indicate their usual place of residence. This data becomes particularly interesting when the distribution of the NEC student population is compared with the national adult population. The differences (NEC percentage minus national percentage) are shown on the following map:

This map shows that in general terms NEC attracts higher proportions of the population in an area south of a line from the Humber to the Severn than it does north of this line. Within this general trend there is a distinct loading of students from East Anglia.

There will be various reasons for these differences not least national economic and social influences. However, the East Anglian bias is more difficult to explain but may relate to awareness of NEC as an educational provider being greater in the immediate vicinity of the College's base in Cambridge; this runs slightly counter to its "National" title and the promotion of its courses which does take place on a national basis.

REASONS FOR CHOOSING OPEN LEARNING

Is open learning a first choice - or a last resort? Students were asked their reasons for studying with NEC; they could indicate agreement with one or more reasons. The survey showed:

	Women	*Men*	*All*
Study in own time	53.6%	54.9%	54.0%
Study at own pace4	8.2%	55.8%	50.7%
Study at home	40.5%	40.7%	40.6%
Family responsibilities	34.2%	5.3%	24.5%
Constraints of job	25.7%	35.4%	29.0%
In institution or hospital	1.8%	3.5%	2.4%
No course locally	12.6%	13.3%	12.8%
No course elsewhere	1.8%	6.2%	3.3%
Disabled	3.2%	1.8%	2.7%

Generally there is little difference in the reasons quoted by men or women - except in the case of "family responsibilities". However, more women are choosing open learning because of job constraints: in 1984 this reason was quoted by 19.5% of women whereas by 1989 the proportion had risen to 25.7%.

Other comparisons with the 1984 survey show that the principal reasons for studying with NEC have remained unchanged and are those traditionally quoted as reasons for studying by open learning: being able to study in one's own time, at one's own pace, and at home. This reinforces the observation made in the 1984 survey report that "few students actually chose distance learning as a last resort - the vast majority chose it as their first and very positive choice".

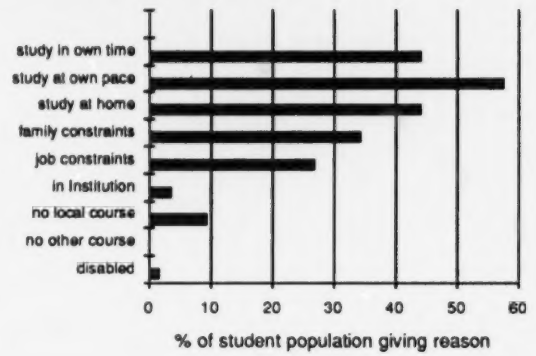
Another observation in the earlier report was that "until very recently, there was a widespread belief... that no one in their right mind would ever take an open or distance learning course if they could possibly find a more traditional form of course locally". The surveys have refuted this hypothesis in general terms. Indeed, while in 1984 19.0% of students were studying with NEC at least partly because no course was available this figure had dropped to 12.8% by 1989.

"What I did was enjoyable and it is good that you can fit it in with the family and do your own hours."

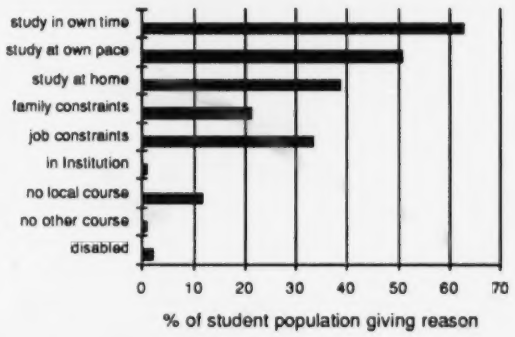
"I enjoy being able to work at my own pace."

It is interesting to see how some of the reasons for choosing to study with NEC vary according to the course subject area.

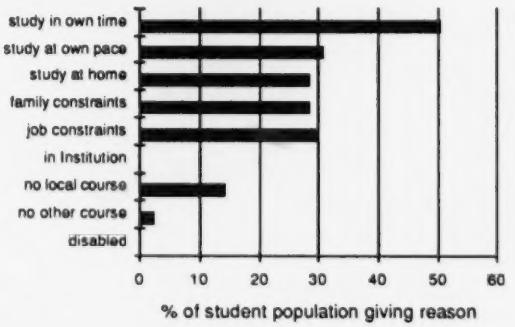
Reasons for studying with NEC
Students on 'fresh start' courses



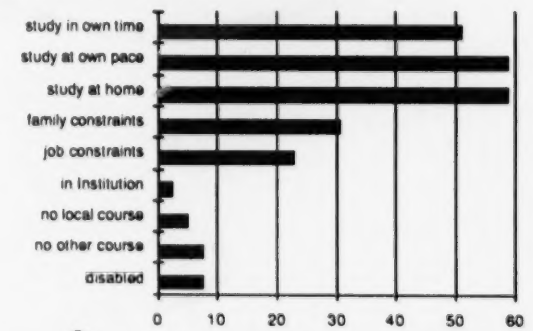
Reasons for studying with NEC
Students on GCSE courses



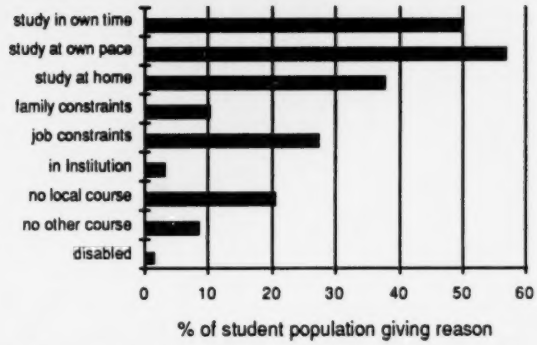
Reasons for studying with NEC
Students on GCE A level courses



Reasons for studying with NEC
Students on OU preparatory courses



Reasons for studying with NEC
Students on other NEC courses



So we can see that the main reasons for studying NEC courses are as follows in the respective course areas:

- for "fresh start" courses, prefer to study at own pace
- for GCSE courses, prefer to study in own time
- for 'A' level courses, prefer to study in own time
- for Open University preparatory courses, prefer to study at own pace and prefer to study at home
- for other NEC courses, prefer to study in own time.

"I found the two courses I did very worthwhile: they helped give me confidence for my OU study whilst re-teaching basic study skills I had forgotten."

WHY A PARTICULAR COURSE?

For this question students were asked to bear in mind their most recent NEC course and give one (i.e. the main) reason for studying it.

	Women	*Men*	*All*
Improving knowledge	15.8%	17.7%	16.4%
Improving learning skills	10.4%	4.4%	8.4%
Preparation for OU	18.0%	14.2%	16.7%
Personal interest	24.8%	32.7%	27.5%
Advance in employment	9.0%	8.0%	8.7%
Employment re-entry	1.8%	0.9%	1.5%
Future career	16.2%	14.2%	15.5%
Other	4.1%	8.0%	5.4%

A similar question was posed in 1984. It allowed a number of responses and did not ask about the possibility of preparing for employment re-entry. But after adjustment for these factors we can make comparisons as follows between the 1984 and 1990 survey responses:

	1984	*1990*
Improving knowledge	16.5%	16.4%
Improving learning skills	13.1%	8.4%
Preparation for OU	12.4%	16.7%
Personal interest	34.6%	27.5%
Advance in employment	7.5%	8.7%
Employment re-entry n/a	1.5%	
Future career	14.7%	15.5%
Other	1.2%	5.4%

The two tables provoke some interesting observations.

For example, the development of learning skills is a less important motivation for NEC study than it used to be; 13.1% of students quoted it in 1984 compared with 8.4% in 1990. "Return to learning" is now a lesser feature of NEC study but one that is more often quoted by women (10.4%) than men (4.4%).

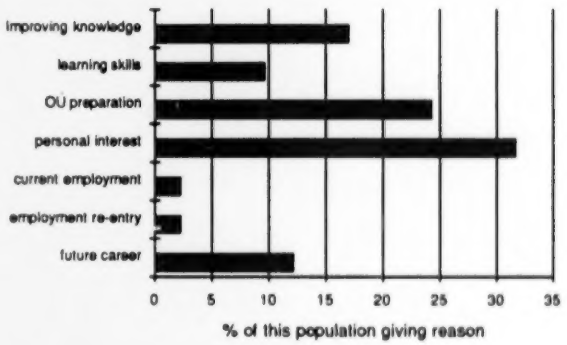
Women also quote employment or career related reasons more often than men; 27% of women made such a reference compared with 23.1% of men.

On the other hand the main reason quoted by men (32.7% of them) is "personal interest" although overall this reason is less important in 1990 than it was in 1984.

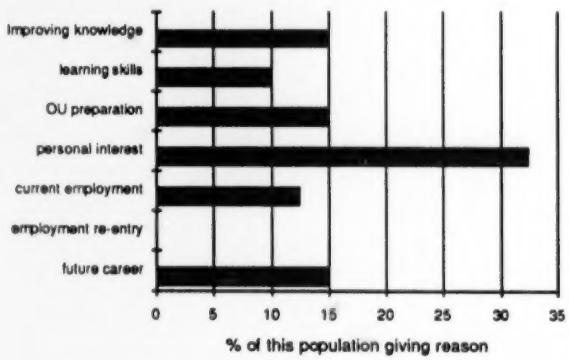
"It is my belief that NEC courses will help me now and in the future."

We can gain further insight to the reasons for studying a particular course by looking at students in particular occupation groupings. The following graphs are instructive.

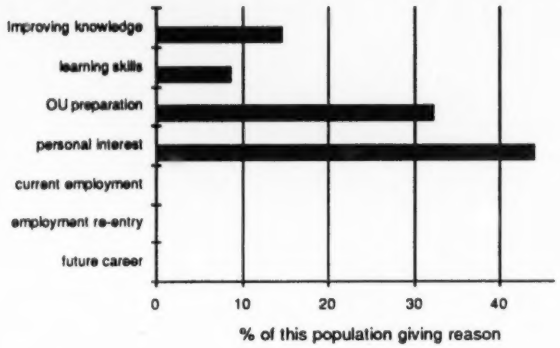
Reasons for course choice
Housewives



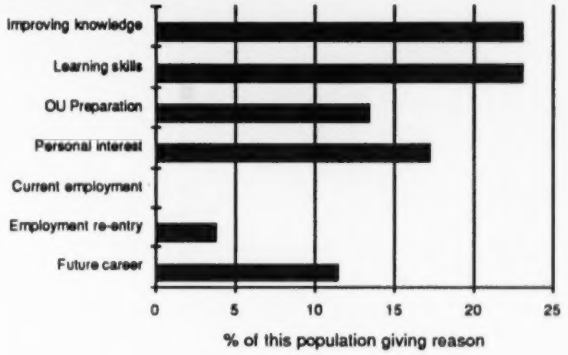
Reasons for course choice
Women in office and clerical work



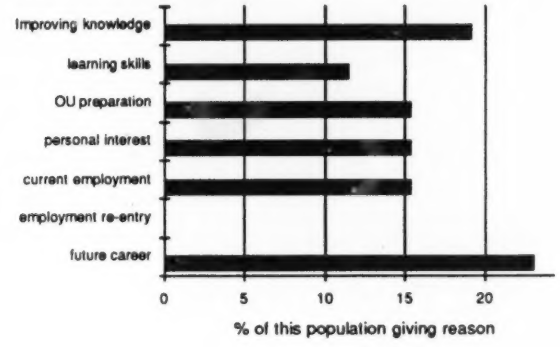
Reasons for course choice
Retired men and women



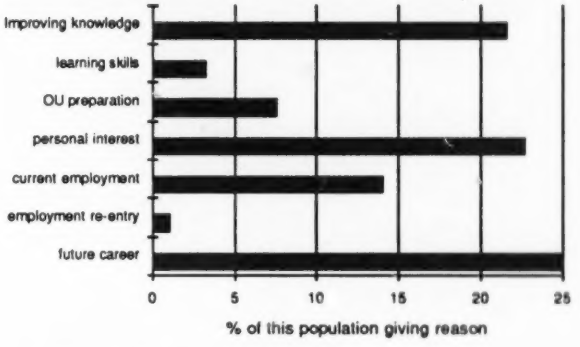
Reasons for course choice
Students on 'fresh start' courses



Reasons for course choice
Men in 'white collar' jobs



Reasons for course choice
Students on GCSE courses



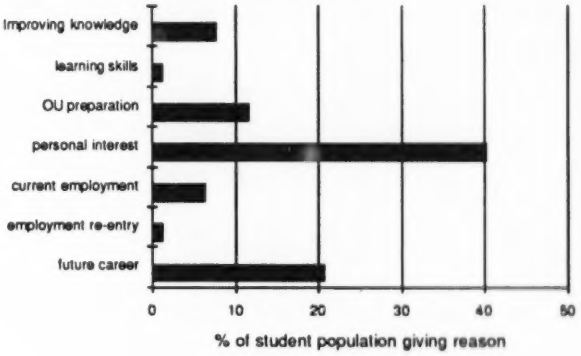
While personal interest is frequently quoted by each group as a significant reason for studying a particular NEC course, the subsidiary reasons vary:

- 24.4% of women who classify themselves as housewives are preparing for Open University courses;
- 32.3% of retired men and women are also preparing to study Open University courses;
- of women in clerical or office work, 15% are seeking to improve or refresh their subject knowledge and another 15% are preparing for a future career;
- the main reason quoted by men in "white collar" occupations (administrators, managers, clerical and office staff, sales and service) (23.1%) is preparation for a future career.

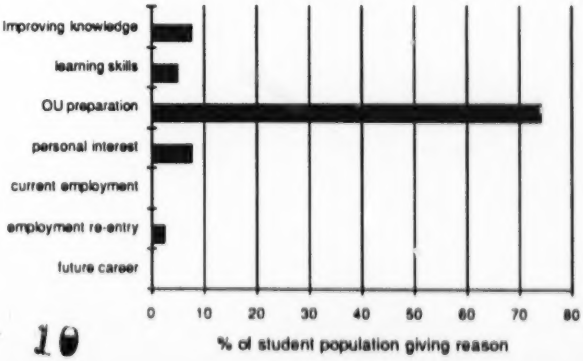
These differences show that NEC is, reassuringly, providing a variety of learning and development opportunities as best suits particular needs of occupational categories.

Different main reasons also emerge when we consider the responses according to the subject areas in which students are studying.

Reasons for course choice
Students on GCE 'A' level courses



Reasons for course choice
Students on OU preparatory courses



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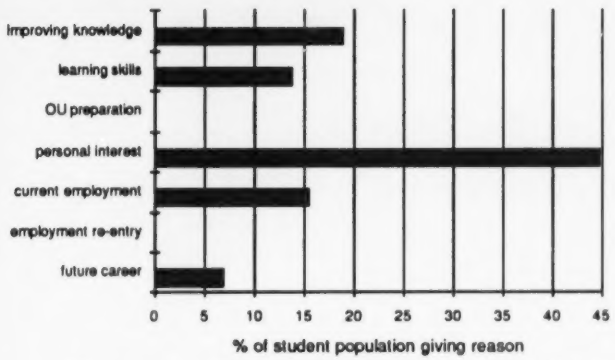
Reasons for course choice
Students on other NEC courses



Thus we see that the main reasons for studying in particular subject areas with NEC are:

- for "fresh start" or return-to-learning courses, refreshing or improving subject knowledge, and testing or improving learning skills;
- for GCSE courses, preparation for a future career;
- for GCE 'A' level courses, personal interest;
- for Open University preparatory courses (not surprisingly), preparation for Open University;
- for other NEC courses, personal interest.

PLANNING A CAREER CHANGE?

If a student was preparing for a future career change we asked them to indicate in which employment area they hoped this would be.

	Women	*Men*	*All*
Armed forces	0.9%	6.0%	2.7%
Admin/management	7.8%	17.9%	11.5%
Teachers and lecturers	22.4%	6.0%	16.4%
Professions/the arts	15.5%	7.5%	12.6%
Scientists and engineers	4.3%	6.0%	4.9%
Technical	4.3%	11.9%	7.1%
Engineering trades	0.0%	7.5%	2.7%
Farming, construction	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Transport	0.0%	1.5%	0.5%
Clerical and office staff	12.1%	9.0%	10.9%
Sales and services	1.7%	3.0%	2.2%
Other	31.0%	23.9%	28.4%

(Precise definitions of occupational groups used in the questionnaire are described on page 2 of this report.)

By comparing these responses with existing occupations it is found that a large number of women are hoping to become teachers or lecturers. In particular some would be moving from office or clerical work but the greatest number are currently not in employment. Other occupations large numbers of women are aiming towards are the professions, the arts and clerical and office work. Once more, these occupations are being sought by women not currently in employment.

The picture for men is different: the biggest area of career change is to administrative or management jobs. Interestingly, they are moving in this direction from many different current jobs. So for many it may be less a case of radical re-direction of working life than moving to a management position in their current area. This ties in with responses indicating that NEC study is associated with advancement in current employment. For men, as for women, other common career directions are towards the professions, the arts and clerical and office work.

STUDENT INCOME

To find out more about the personal circumstances of students, a question was included which asked them to indicate the level of net (i.e. after tax) household income. The survey showed income groups as follows:

	Women	*Men*	*All*
over £25,000	11.7%	5.8%	9.7%
£20,001 to £25,000	13.7%	11.7%	13.0%
£15,001 to £20,000	12.2%	11.7%	12.0%
£10,001 to £15,000	23.4%	24.3%	23.7%
£7,501 to £10,000	12.2%	18.4%	14.3%
£5,001 to £7,500	9.8%	15.5%	11.7%
under £5,000	17.1%	12.6%	15.6%

These figures show that the largest proportion of NEC students has a household income of £10,000 to £15,000 which equates with the national average for incomes. However, a large number (41.6%) have a household income of less than £10,000. The ability to pay fees is therefore of concern to many students - and therefore to NEC - hence another question in the survey.

PAYING NEC COURSE FEES

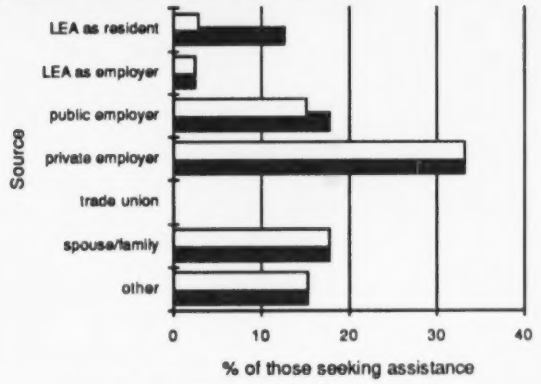
Students were asked if they had sought help with payment of their course fees. The survey answers were:

	Women	*Men*	*All*
Yes	14.4%	15.0%	14.6%
No	85.6%	85.0%	85.4%

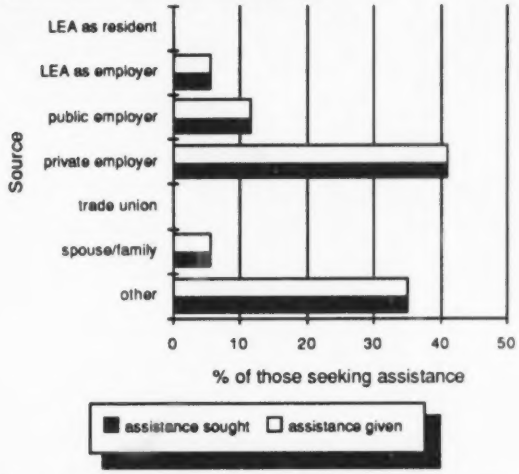
While the proportions of men and women who sought assistance are identical, different patterns emerge when the sources of such help are examined, as the charts on the next page show.

The graphs on the next page show that a small number of women approached their LEAs but literally only one received assistance from this source. Men did not approach their LEA – but did make greater calls on family income: 35.3% of men and 15.4% of women received help with fee payment from a spouse or other family member. Whoever men approached they always succeeded in gaining assistance!

Sources and outcomes for women



Sources and outcomes for men



Overall it is noticeable that a relatively small proportion of students (16.7%) approached third parties for assistance with fee payment. The overall picture was as follows:

Approached	*Helped*	*Refused*
LEA as resident	1	4
LEA as employer	2	0
Public sector employer	9	2
Private sector employer	20	0
Trade union	0	0
Spouse/family member	8	0
Other	12	0

If a student had to pay all or part of their NEC fees personally they were asked if the availability of an instalment scheme was crucial to the ability to pay:

	Women	*Men*	*All*
Yes	25.2%	17.7%	22.7%
No	74.8%	82.3%	77.3%

These figures imply that women (25.2%) more frequently than men (17.7%) found fee payment difficult. A subsidiary question posed in the survey confirms this view. Students were asked how easy or difficult they found payment of any fees for which they were personally responsible.

They indicated that fee payment was:

	Women	*Men*	*All*
A severe hardship	2.0%	0.0%	1.4%
Quite difficult	28.8%	22.1%	26.6%
Reasonably easy	42.4%	41.1%	42.0%
No problem	26.8%	36.8%	30.0%

While pleas of severe hardship are rare, fee payment is more difficult for women (30.8% quoting hardship or difficulty) than for men (22.1%). It is therefore apparent that whatever the aims and ideals of open learning, and of the accessibility of learning opportunities, fee levels are a significant disincentive for significant groups of students.

"I think your courses are very expensive, particularly for retired people – this is a pity because they are a very good way to learn if one is retired."

"I pay for tuition out of my invalid car allowance, paying in three instalments is very difficult."

STUDYING INDEPENDENTLY?

We asked students in what mode they were studying NEC courses.

	Women	*Men*	*All*
NEC materials/tutor	78.5%	80.0%	79.0%
Organised scheme	0.5%	1.0%	0.7%
Supplementary tuition	6.8%	7.0%	6.9%
Family/friend's help	14.1%	12.0%	13.4%

(The precise modes of study referred to in the survey were: solely with NEC materials and appointed tutor; part of an organised scheme with another organisation; NEC materials supplemented by tuition from another source; mainly NEC materials and tutor but help from family/friend).

NEC's provision was therefore the major source of learning for most students. But the tutor has an important part to play in avoiding the loneliness of the (long) distance learner. Indeed, the role of the tutor was often referred to in open ended responses to the survey:

"I felt I need a tutor to talk things through with... I feel so isolated sometimes and the college and tutor feel so far away."

"It perhaps would have motivated me more if the counsellor had... become more involved."

"I would like to suggest that a tutor can be provided who a student can telephone to talk through a problem."

Some seek peer group interaction:

"I am doing it on my own and feel it would be more beneficial... with a group or a partner."

"I am sure many people would benefit by contacting/meeting other students with similar interests and subjects."

These comments show that some students felt that their progress would have been aided by tutors taking a more proactive role. NEC is responding to this issue, and others, as the final section of this report describes.

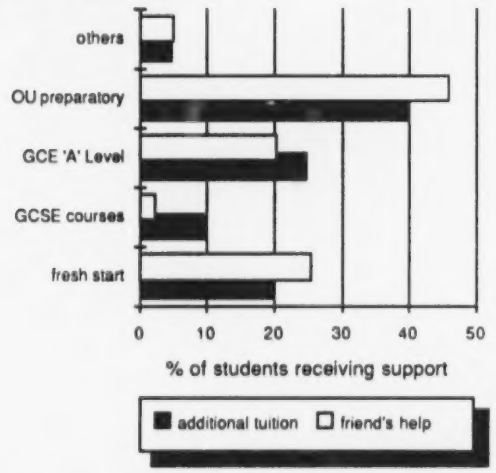
However, it is important to recognise that many students already find their tutors most helpful.

"The tutor I sent my assignments to has been a great help, and without his advice I would not have carried on so quickly."

"I would just like to thank NEC... for appointing such a helpful tutor who has helped me personally through studying and through counselling, thus making the course more enjoyable."

But to gain a little more insight to the current use of NEC courses with some form of additional support, the survey looked at the subjects studied by those receiving help from friends and by those receiving supplementary tuition from another agency.

Additional course support
by course subject area



This diagram shows that it is mainly those studying GCSE and GCE 'A' level courses who seek additional help of some sort. This may follow from the fact that most students studying these courses expect to take public examinations – and are therefore keen to achieve high academic standards.

PROGRESS ON COURSES

"Even if I don't pass my exams in the summer I have still achieved part of my aim – to improve my knowledge and understanding of mathematics and make me feel more confident in tackling mathematical problems."

This report has already broken down some of the data depending on the type of course being studied. As this breakdown is about to be used again it will be helpful to give more explicit information based on courses grouped generically.

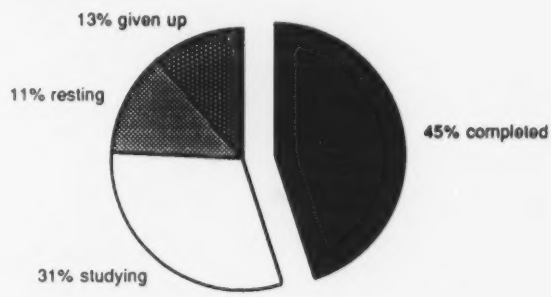
The survey showed the following proportions of students on different course types:

	Women	*Men*	*All*
Fresh start	19.0%	11.9%	16.5%
Languages	3.6%	6.7%	4.7%
GCSEs	29.8%	29.6%	29.7%
GCE 'A' level	24.6%	24.4%	24.5%
OU preparation	12.3%	14.8%	13.2%
Computing	1.6%	3.0%	2.1%
Business courses	2.8%	5.9%	3.9%
Specialist courses	4.4%	1.5%	3.4%
Health & Leisure	2.0%	2.2%	2.1%

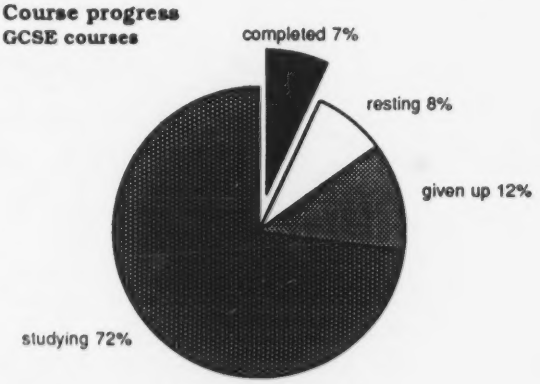
(So that comparisons are meaningful, by being based on reasonable sized populations, this report groups courses as: fresh start; GCSEs; GCE 'A' level; OU preparation; and other.)

The survey asked students to categorise their academic progress on courses. The breakdown just described is used to compare patterns in different course groups.

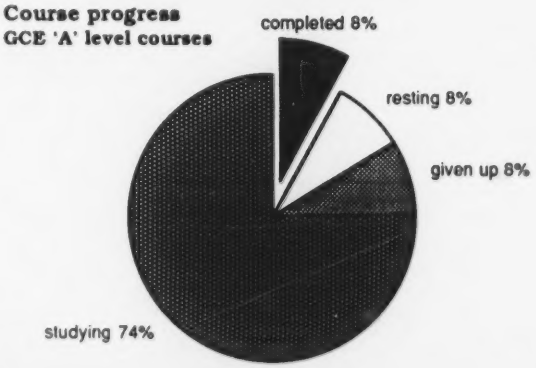
Course progress
'Fresh start' courses



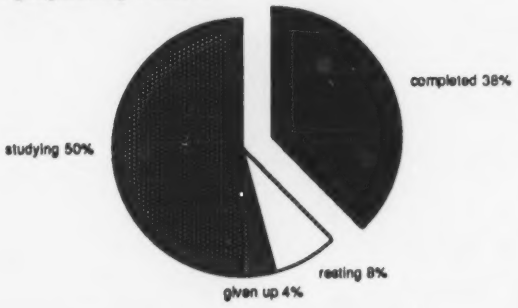
Course progress
GCSE courses



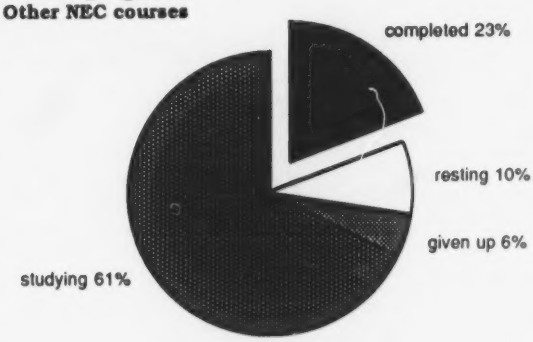
Course progress
GCE 'A' level courses



Course progress
OU preparatory courses



Course progress
Other NEC courses



The overall picture, for all courses, is given in the following table:

	Women	*Men*	*All*
Still studying	59.4%	64.4%	61.1%
Completed – no exam	16.4%	14.1%	15.6%
Exam pending	1.2%	3.7%	2.0%
Exam passed	2.7%	1.5%	2.3%
Exam failed	0.4%	0.0%	0.3%
"Resting"	9.8%	9.6%	9.7%
Given up the course	10.2%	6.7%	9.0%

The diagrams and table above show, not surprisingly, that many students, especially on the longer courses, had not finished studying the course material at the date of the survey.

The highest numbers completing their studies were on the relatively short "fresh start" (or return to learning) courses. Students on these courses also more frequently reported that they had given up their studies or were taking a break from the course. However, this data must be interpreted cautiously because when compared to the numbers who have completed courses the drop out rate is actually relatively good and only bettered by those on Open University preparatory courses.

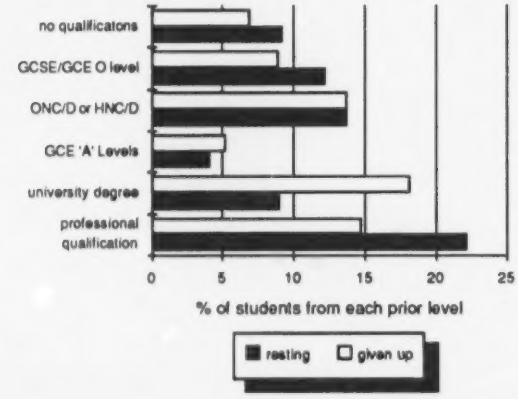
Thus the 12% who have given up their GCSE courses, compared with 7% who have completed them, give greater cause for concern. On the other hand, the success rate of those who complete the course is exceptional – with none reporting failure in the relevant external examination. Of those who studied GCE 'A' level courses only a small proportion failed: 13%.

But overall the numbers who had finished studying when this survey was conducted were relatively small. The drop-out rates may therefore be misleadingly low; indeed, there is some evidence from data on assignment completion rates monitored by NEC that fewer than one in three students complete all the assignments on a course.

> *"Although I am at this time not intending to take an exam because of my unpredictable health I am committed to completing the course and will do so to the best of my ability."*

A further insight can be gained from the current survey by considering the previous levels of education of those who are taking a rest from their courses or who have given them up without completion.

Course progress
Students resting or having given up



Whereas it might have been expected that those with low educational qualifications were at risk of not completing courses, the chart above shows that the opposite is actually true:

- the highest rate of giving up courses (18.2%) is found among those who already have university degrees;
- the lowest rate of giving up courses (5.3%) is among those with GCE 'A' levels, closely followed by those with no previous educational qualifications (7.0%);
- students with professional qualifications are more likely to be taking a break (22.2%);
- those with a university degree (or equivalent) (9.1%) or with no educational qualifications (9.3%) are least likely to be taking a break.

The reasons for taking a rest or giving up a course are also of interest.

Students who had indicated this outcome to their studies were asked to indicate which factors (they could chose more than one if appropriate) influenced their decision.

	Women	*Men*	*All*
Pressures at work	19.2%	23.9%	20.5%
Family/domestic reasons	23.1%	8.7%	19.3%
Health problems	13.8%	10.9%	13.1%
Limited time	19.2%	26.1%	21.0%
Course unsuitable	5.4%	13.0%	7.4%
Course too difficult	6.2%	4.3%	5.7%
Other	13.1%	13.0%	13.1%

Gender has a significant impact on the reasons for lack of progress on a courses:

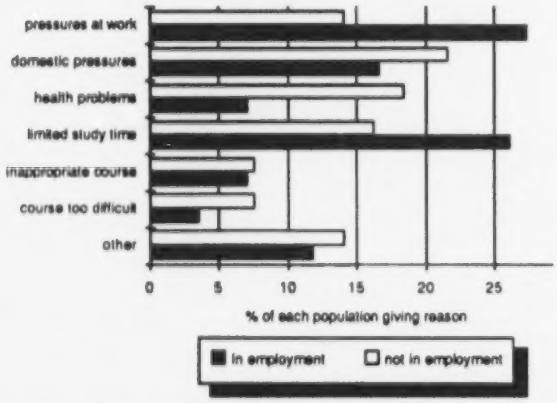
- family or domestic pressures weigh more heavily on women (23.1%) than men (8.7%);
- men (13.0%) claim more often than women (5.4%) that the course was not really what was wanted;
- men (26.1%) more frequently find they have limited time available for studying; for women the comparable figure is 19.2%.

"I am very pleased to explain why, having received all the material for my course early in the new year, I have still to come to grips with it. My health is not good, but it will get better."

"Although I have given up the course, I am still reading the material and learning from it. I am only sorry that, due to the arrival of twins, I am not able to take a more active part in the course."

A number of correlations with other data collected in the survey might indicate those students most at risk of not completing a course. First, reasons given by students in and out of employment are examined.

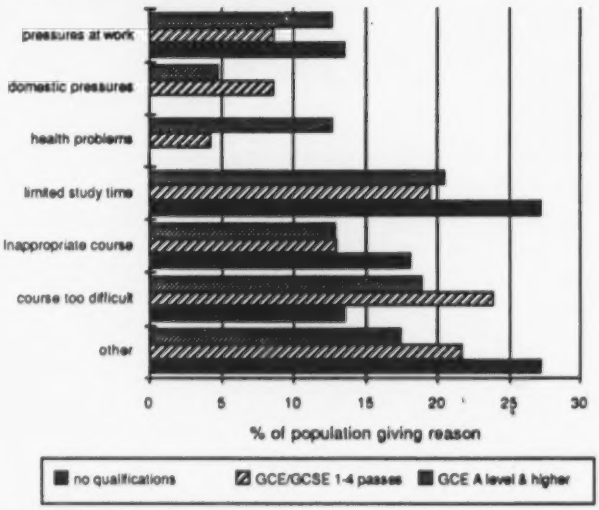
Reasons for resting or giving up
Students in or not in employment



Health and domestic problems take a heavier toll on those not in employment; work pressures and limited time available for study weigh more heavily on those who are working.

Reasons for taking a rest or not completing a course also vary depending on students' highest levels of previous education. The chart that follows shows that those with no previous educational qualifications are also likely to suffer pressure from work or to find they have limited time for study. It is also noteworthy that despite their greater experience of education, those with GCE 'A' levels are more likely to choose a course that is inappropriate to their needs; 12.7% said they had given up or were taking a rest because they found the course content was not really what they had wanted.

Reasons for resting or giving up
by previous level of education



TIME SPENT STUDYING

It is difficult for students to determine precisely how much time they actually spent studying each course – and difficult to draw meaningfully on such information given the variety of course lengths. However, the survey did address the question of students' perceptions of the time spent studying by asking them to indicate whether they felt they had spent more, or less, time on their NEC courses than they had anticipated.

	Women	*Men*	*All*
Much more	12.1%	13.0%	12.4%
A little more	21.9%	26.9%	23.5%
As anticipated	34.4%	31.5%	33.4%
A little less	19.1%	18.5%	18.9%
Much less	12.6%	10.2%	11.8%

A fear often voiced by providers of open learning is that the time required to study a course is underestimated. In NEC's case it seems that the advice on study time given to students is about right: overall a third thought they spent just about they time they anticipated in study. The proportion spending more time than expected (35.9%) is almost balanced by those feeling they spend less time than anticipated (30.7%).

STUDIED BEFORE?

The survey enquired of students' prior experience of distance learning: students were asked if they had studied with NEC before 1989.

	Women	*Men*	*All*
Yes	18.8%	11.5%	16.4%
No	81.1%	88.5%	83.6%
In which year?			
1985	14.3%	15.4%	14.5%
1986	9.5%	23.1%	12.7%
1987	23.8%	23.1%	23.6%
1988	16.7%	7.7%	14.5%
another year	35.7%	30.8%	34.6%

"I did study with NEC many years ago but did not complete the course and now I have restarted with NEC I must congratulate you on the changes that have taken place."

A small proportion of enrolments are "repeat business" but most are studying with NEC for the first time. This would seem to follow from the fact that NEC courses are not parts of coherent programmes of study – although this is changing with, for example, the ABACUS series of courses coming into the prospectus as this report is written. The survey also asked if other courses had been studied "by correspondence" or "at a distance" but not with NEC.

	Women	*Men*	*All*
Yes	25.2%	24.8%	25.1%
No	74.8%	75.2%	74.9%

This data shows that a significant proportion of NEC students are specifically seeking learning opportunities at a distance. This reinforces the observation that students have very positive reasons for choosing open learning.

PLANNING TO STUDY AGAIN?

But having experienced NEC, what sort of course might be sought in future? The survey asked students whether they planned to study other courses in the future.

	Women	*Men*	*All*
Yes	73.9%	75.2%	74.3%
No	14.9%	18.6%	16.1%
Undecided	11.3%	6.2%	9.6%

Thus it seems that for a substantial proportion of NEC students (three out of four) their current studies are but part of longer term study plans.

"I found the NEC course I did a vital trigger to the next stage of my home study plans."

Students were asked with whom they might be studying in the future.

	Women	*Men*	*All*
NEC	48.2%	44.2%	46.9%
Open University	30.2%	30.1%	30.1%
Open College	3.6%	6.2%	4.5%
Correspondence college	2.7%	4.4%	3.3%
Local evening class	19.4%	17.7%	18.8%
Local college day class	9.5%	9.7%	9.9%
Other	9.5%	12.4%	10.4%

(Respondents were allowed to indicate more than one provider hence the fact that the columns above add up to more than 100%.)

There is a close correlation here between the responses from men and women despite their differences in personal circumstances and reasons for studying with NEC. Many intend to continue studying in distance and/or open mode although one in four might take a course at a local college. The Open College is perhaps not frequently quoted because its offerings remain limited and poorly promulgated.

Numbers intending to study with the Open University are larger than those who gave this as an explicit reason for their NEC studies. For some individuals NEC study has perhaps created an awareness of Open University opportunity rather than the former being undertaken with the latter already in mind.

WHAT'S SPECIAL ABOUT NEC?

"I think organisations like NEC are essential as alternative methods of studying – especially for people like me who, owing to grant problems, are unable to continue their education via more conventional methods. I very much like and appreciate the freedom of choice and personal preference acknowledged. I think NEC embraces the true spirit of education – that nobody, no matter what their circumstances, should be denied the opportunity of education."

The report has already examined the importance students attached to the general reasons for studying independently at a distance or how they related their course choice to vocational or personal needs.

But what about the reasons for studying with NEC in particular rather than other local or distance providers? Students were asked to give a rating of "very important", "quite important" or "not important" to various reasons.

The percentages total 100% when the *verys*, *quites* and *nots* are added together for each individual reason.

	Very	*Quite*	*Not*
NEC Certificate	11.3%	34.9%	53.8%
External examination	41.0%	20.2%	38.8%
Professional recognition	16.1%	10.7%	73.2%
Employer acceptance	14.9%	19.9%	65.1%
Place at college	25.3%	16.6%	58.1%
NEC is "national" body	18.6%	37.9%	43.5%
NEC is "independent"	16.3%	41.9%	41.9%
NEC is a "trust"	28.3%	39.3%	32.4%
NEC accredited by CACC	34.3%	37.7%	28.0%
Could postpone course	33.8%	50.3%	15.9%
Cancel: part fee refund	20.9%	38.7%	40.4%

(The precise reasons listed in the survey questionnaire were: could receive NEC Certificate of Course Completion; course leads to an external examination; course recognised by a professional body; employer accepts course for career purposes; could lead to place at college, polytechnic or university; NEC is a "national" body; NEC is an "independent" body; NEC is a non-profit making trust; NEC is accredited by CACC; could postpone the course for a short period if appropriate; could cancel within 30 days and get part of the fee back.)

This data shows that unvalidated certification (for example NEC's own certificate of course completion) is not highly regarded by students; they are more concerned to study courses with are validated by external examination.

"I would like to do more courses maybe with written exams or just a completion certificate. I have to have something with a result at the end to restore confidence in myself."

Despite the fact that many students are studying for employment and career related reasons, recognition of courses by professional bodies or employers is relatively unimportant.

There are varying responses to the unique combination of characteristics that NEC can offer institutionally: a national, independent, non-profit making trust accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Correspondence Colleges. The national and independent dimensions are quite important, the non-profit making status is more important, but accreditation is most highly regarded. The last question above reinforces the importance of being able to test the open learning experience without a full commitment to its likely financial costs.

The penultimate question (which was rated as unimportant by the fewest number of students) reflects a fundamental characteristic of NEC: a course can be postponed for a short period if appropriate. This flexibility is clearly valuable to students. While it is often associated with open learning in general it is not often available in courses from other providers; many are not truly self pacing but are linked to quite specific timetables. This NEC characteristic is undoubtedly one that should be preserved.

NEC'S RESPONSE

A rich picture of NEC's student body has come out of the research represented in this report. But data of this sort only has value if it leads to change.

NEC has never been slow to grasp opportunities. The data collected in this survey has already led to changes, while more are being considered or are in the process of implementation. The first step that NEC took was to brief staff on student needs and to ask for suggestions to improve student support. NEC has always been proud of the flexibility of its administrative procedures and its Student Services Section plays an important part in supporting students. In a cost conscious economy there are inevitably pressures to reduce open ended support. But NEC now has precise evidence of how valuable this asset is. As students themselves put it:

"I like the way the college feels only a phone call away."

"Whenever I telephone, your staff are always helpful."

The survey's findings have also influenced programme developments. For example, the new series of office skills courses (called ABACUS) is being developed to meet directly the needs of the very significant proportions of students, especially women, working in this field. And a special 'Return to Work' course aiming to build self-confidence and job hunting skills was introduced this January.

These courses tie in with major developments in national vocational qualifications. Indeed, NEC has been at the forefront in providing open learning materials tailored to the needs of new competence based forms of accreditation. The college's support for these developments has been due in large measure to their facilitation of the very forms of open access, self directed learning that it has pioneered since its inception.

Another significant response to this survey has been to review the role of the NEC tutor. To a large extent NEC expected students to initiate contact with tutors which tended, for some students, to reinforce some of the negative aspects of independent distance learning. The responses to some of the survey questions, however, indicated the need for tutors to be more proactive. This might simply involve following up a student whose progress, measured by failure to submit assignments, has slipped. Some of the student comments quoted earlier in this article put this issue plainly. Another student response reinforces the point:

"I am surprised that as I have not completed any written work (that nobody has) contacted me."

Monitoring student progress and encouraging tutors to intervene more readily has a cost – but it seems worth it.

NEC's early action following these responses includes a two-pronged effort to encourage inactive students. All students will receive a letter of encouragement from NEC two months after joining. Tutors will be requested at the same time to phone or write to inactive students. A longer term action plan involves tutors in more face-to-face contact with each other and NEC staff and a better networking system among both tutors and students. The survey shows that this kind of proactive tutoring will be much appreciated and beneficial to many students.

These improvements are even more worthwhile because the survey has shown that NEC is finally reaching the students it was set up for; the kind described at the beginning of this report and in mind since NEC's inception.

More, but still not enough, of those who need a second chance are now getting it. Increased numbers of women are now studying with NEC. More students are coming from the less well qualified educational groups. Vocational and personal needs are being better met.

NEC now knows that it is getting closer to the vision its Director, Ros Morpeth, described in the volume celebrating its twenty five years' work since its foundation:

"Our aim is to move towards 'open education' at all levels and for all purposes."